

THE GREAT OPERAS



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The
BOHEMIAN GIRL
BALFE

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'I dreamt I dwelt in marble halls'

THE GREAT OPERAS
BY
J. CUTHBERT HADDEN

The
BOHEMIAN GIRL
BALFE



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DRAMATIS PERSONÆ

COUNT ARNHEIM, Governor of Presburg (Baritone)

THADDEUS, a proscribed Pole (Tenor)

FLORESTEIN, Nephew of the Count (Tenor)

DEVILSHOOF, Chief of the Gipsies (Bass)

Captain of the Guard (Bass)

Officer (Tenor)

ARLINE, Daughter of the Count (Soprano)

BUDA, her Attendant (Soprano)

QUEEN OF THE GIPSIES (Soprano)

Chorus

FIRST ACT

THE scene of "The Bohemian Girl" is laid in Austria. When the curtain rises on the First Act we see before us the Castle and grounds of Count Arnheim, the Governor of Presburg, who is entertaining a hunting party. Presently the Count himself enters, accompanied by his six-year-old daughter Arline, and his nephew Florestein. After the Count has sung a short solo in praise of a soldier's life, and his retainers and the hunters have made their choral response and withdrawn, a Polish exile and fugitive, Thaddeus, rushes in, seeking refuge from the Austrian military. "'Tis sad to leave your Fatherland," he sings. Next there enters a band of passing Gipsies, with one Devilshoof for leader, singing a blithe Gipsy chorus. Thaddeus tells his story to Devils-

hoof, and the latter induces the proscribed rebel to cast in his lot with the wanderers.

Meanwhile, Florestein and certain of the sportsmen dash excitedly across the grounds of the Castle, looking for Arline, who has been attacked by a stag. Thaddeus, getting hold of a rifle, hurries away after them, finds Arline, and frees her from danger by slaying the stag. The Count, overcome with gratitude for the safe return of his child, invites her deliverer and his companion, Devilshoof, to an approaching banquet at the Castle. The invitation is accepted, and when the banquet comes off, the company are startled by Thaddeus defiantly refusing to drink the Emperor's health. He is about to be dealt with by the soldiers when Devilshoof intervenes on his behalf. Then the Gipsy chief, for his daring, is himself arrested and confined to the chateau, while Thaddeus, at Arnheim's earnest entreaty, is allowed to go free. The banquet is resumed, but is soon interrupted again by the escape of Devilshoof, who is seen by the terrified company bearing away in his arms the little Arline. With a stirring finale, the Act closes.



The Rescue of Arline

SECOND ACT

Twelve years have now gone by, and Count Arnheim is still without tidings of his daughter, the kidnapped Arline. Indeed he has given up all hope of ever seeing her again. The Act opens in the Gipsy camp in the outskirts of Presburg, where a great fair is about to be held. There, in the Queen's tent, we behold Arline peacefully asleep, Thaddeus watching over her. A short chorus is sung, and the Gipsies, with Devilshoof at their head, scamper away in search of booty. Presently they come upon Florestein, returning from a debauch, half-drunk. His jewelry is soon in the hands of the Gipsies, including a certain diamond medallion which Devilshoof retains for himself. Meanwhile, Arline, waking from her sleep, has been relating to Thaddeus a strange dream she has just had ("I dreamt that I dwelt in marble halls"). Thaddeus thereupon reveals to her the meaning of the scar on her arm, and announces himself as her rescuer. She desires to know

her history, but Thaddeus declines to reveal the secret lest it should blight her regard for him ; for Thaddeus, as he now proceeds to tell, is in love with Arline. There are mutual confessions of attachment, and the Gipsy Queen (who is herself in love with Thaddeus) entering, she unites the pair according to the customs of the tribe, at the same time secretly vowing to be revenged against Arline.

Here we have a new scene—a street in the town, with the great fair in progress. The Gipsies soon arrive, Arline marching at their head, blithely singing (“Come with the Gipsy Bride”), to the accompaniment of the castanets. Her companions disappear down the street, and she, with Thaddeus, Devilshoof, and the Queen, get mixed up among the throng of merry-makers. They encounter Florestein, who, attracted by Arline’s beauty, attempts to insult her. He is recognised by the Queen as the owner of the stolen medallion, which she now maliciously places on Arline’s neck, ostensibly as a reward for Arline’s courage in resenting Florestein’s overtures. Florestein



'The heart bowed down

thereupon has Arline arrested for the theft of his medallion, and she is borne away to the Castle, to be tried by her own father.

We are transported to the Court-room. Count Arnheim, entering, is once more saddened by the sight of his long-lost Arline's portrait, and his grief goes into that melancholy reverie, "The heart bowed down." Then Arline is brought in for her trial. As it proceeds, the Count's attention is directed to the scar on her arm. He asks her how it came there. She tells the story as Thaddeus had recounted it. The mystery is revealed. Arnheim recognises his daughter, and the Act ends with that beautiful ensemble, "Praised be the will of Heaven."

THIRD ACT

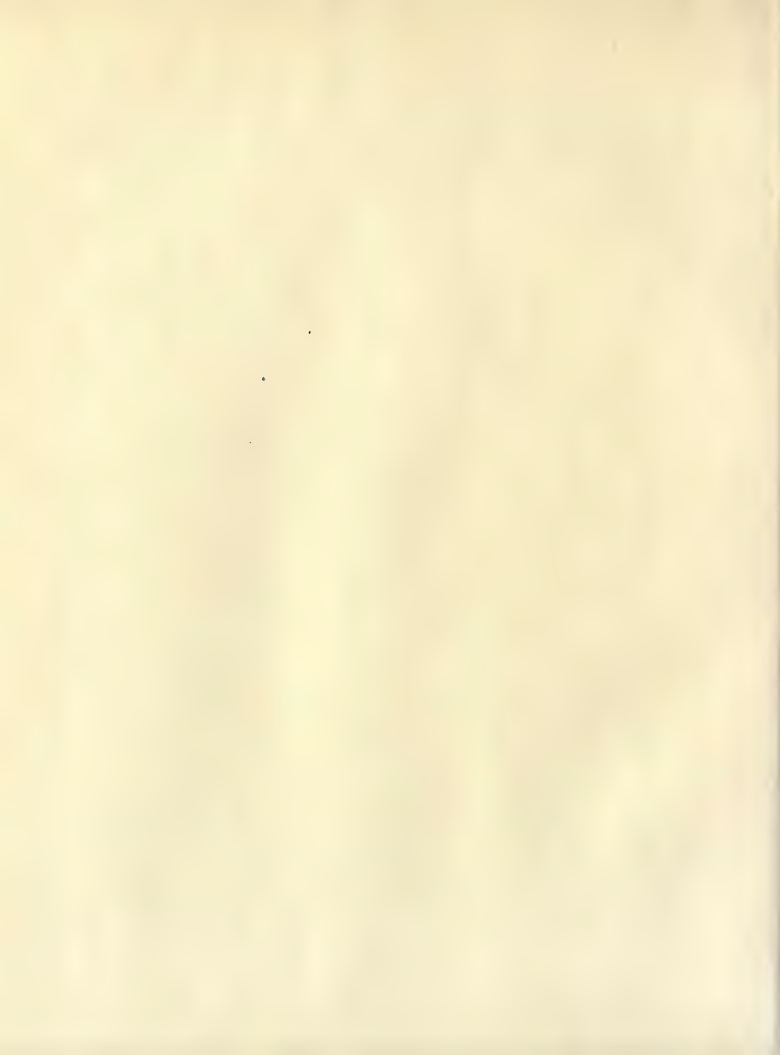
This Act opens in the drawing-room of Castle Arnheim. Arline is back in her home, but still she loves Thaddeus. Mainly through the cunning of Devilshoof, who accompanies him, Thaddeus contrives to have a meeting

with her. He proclaims his passion afresh—in the tender and immortal “When other lips and other hearts”—and she avows that she will be faithful to him. At this point steps are heard approaching, and Thaddeus and Devilshoof get themselves into hiding. A distinguished company march in, and the long-lost Arline is presented to them.

A woman, closely veiled, shortly appears on the scene, and, being questioned as to her identity, tells that she is the Gipsy Queen. She shows where Thaddeus is concealed, and he is dragged forth and ordered to remove himself at once from the company. Arline protests that she loves him, and will go with him. She pleads with her father to relent. Thaddeus proclaims his noble descent, and in that rousing, martial song, “When the fair land of Poland,” vaunts his prowess in battle. Arnheim is by this induced to give his daughter to the noble exile. The Gipsy Queen, filled with wrath and despair, prompts one of her tribe to fire at Thaddeus as he is embracing Arline. Luckily, a timely movement on the part of Devilshoof saves him,



Arline avows her love for Thaddeus



THIRD ACT

II

and the Queen herself is killed instead. The festival proceeds to commemorate the happy fortunes of Arline, and, when the curtain descends, the old song of the Gipsies is heard again as they vanish into the distance.

THE MUSIC

OPINIONS differ widely as to the merits of Balfe's music. The position is well summed up by one of his biographers, Mr. Barclay Squire. To musicians who judge him from the point of view of the old ideal, his brilliancy, melody, and fertility of invention entitle him to a place beside Rossini and Auber; while, on the other hand, by those who look for deeper thought and more intellectual aims in music, he will be regarded as a mere melodist, the ephemeral caterer to a generation who judged rather by manner of expression than by the value of what was expressed. The truth lies midway between these extremes. Balfe's invention, knowledge of effect, above all his melody, will keep his works from being forgotten; and if they are deficient in those

higher qualities demanded by present-day taste, that is no reason why, within their limits, they should cease to please.

Not much need be said about the music of "The Bohemian Girl." The opera has been described as a string of melodic pearls, and such indeed it is. Balfe had an inexhaustible vein of tunefulness. Strauss, parent and patriarch of all the Strausses, dubbed him "King of melody." These airs of his are pure and natural, written spontaneously, as it would seem, without the slightest effort. The musical pedant may sneer at them, but they have a way of finding out the tender spots in the human heart. What did Haydn say about melody? "Let your air be good," he said, "and your composition, whatever it be, will be so likewise, and will assuredly delight. It is the soul of music, the life, the spirit, the essence of a composition. Without it theorists may succeed in discovering and using the most singular chords and combinations, but nothing is heard after all but a laboured sound, which, though it may not vex the ear, leaves the head empty and the heart cold and unaffected by it."

This is not how the Balfe melody leaves the average listener.

"I dreamt that I dwelt in marble halls," in the Second Act, is one of the world's most popular favourites. And who that is at all susceptible to the charms of music does not know "When other lips"? In connection with that immortal air, the following anecdote of Balfe is worth reproducing as characteristic of the impulsive nature of the man. For Balfe was certainly impulsive. Signor Arditi records how, when he (Arditi) had made a success of the first performance of the Italian version of "The Bohemian Girl," the composer, after the final drop of the curtain, embraced him "with a combination of Irish and Italian fervour." Balfe wrote six or seven settings of the words before he hit on the final form of "When other lips." He had tried, and tried, and tried again for the "right" melody. Late one night a cab drove up to a friend's door, and a mighty peal of the bell startled the household. His friend, recognising Balfe's voice outside, went down and opened the door. Balfe rushed in, waving a roll of music over his head, and calling out,

"I've got it! I've got it! I've got it!" He ran upstairs to the drawing-room, sat down at the piano, and awoke the surprised echoes of the night with the now-renowned melody.

He can hardly have had such trouble with the other gems of "The Bohemian Girl." The whole thing sounds so natural and easy—the fascinating melodies; the sparkling, animated choruses; the orchestration charming and restrained: no noise for the sake of noise, no exuberance of sound, no absolute vulgarity. The modern musician who swears by Wagner and Strauss may regard Balfe's orchestration as comparatively feeble, his dramatic grip of a rather elementary kind. But Balfe produces his effect and that is enough. Even the modern composer admits the simple beauty of many of the airs in "The Bohemian Girl." One writes to me, mentioning specially "When other lips," "I dreamt," and "The heart bowed down." These, he says, "are all gems in their way. More than that, I think each of them expresses in a direct and simple manner the character not only of the part but the atmos-

phere of the situation. This alone shows that they are good, and it is a vast pity that our latter-day composers do not—or will not—evinced some of their qualities.”

Much that Balfe wrote in the way of opera has gone quite out of fashion. But “The Bohemian Girl” has never lost its power to charm, and it must be many a day before that happens.

THE HISTORY

THE libretto of "The Bohemian Girl" ("immortal balderdash," it has been called) came from the pen of Alfred Bunn, the manager of Drury Lane Theatre, whom Malibran facetiously dubbed "Good Friday" because he was "a hot, cross Bunn." Bunn had already collaborated with Balfe in "The Maid of Artois." He derived his idea of the libretto of "The Bohemian Girl" from a ballet in three acts called "The Gipsy," written by Saint Georges, and produced at the Grand Opera, Paris, in 1839. Saint Georges had taken *his* story from the "Novelas Exemplares" of Cervantes, the author of "Don Quixote" (the same work which had furnished Weber with his "Preciosa"). But Bunn did not know this until some of the friendly

pressmen told him of it after the first performance.

There was a question about what the opera should be called. Bunn himself thought of "The Gipsy"; but that, it was found, had been the title of an unsuccessful transpontine drama, and so was given up. Then he thought of "Thaddeus of Warsaw"; but as he had taken the name of his Polish hero from Miss Porter's then popular novel, the idea of the opera being mistaken for an adaptation of the novel led him to abandon that too. "La Bohémienne" was next proposed. But why give an English opera a French name? objected certain advisers. Bunn, taking the hint, decided for "The Bohemian," but immediately remembered that this would as readily indicate a creature of the male sex as his girlish Arline. Finally, "The Bohemian Girl" was decided upon. One of Balfe's biographers says that, upon reflection, the title appears "clumsy." Who thinks it clumsy now? Time and circumstances have proved it entirely efficient, and it would certainly be difficult to imagine a better.

"The Bohemian Girl" was first produced at Drury Lane Theatre on November 27, 1843. The following was the cast:

Arline	Miss Romer.
Thaddeus	Mr. Harrison.
Gipsy Queen	Miss Betts.
Devilshoof	Mr. Stretton.
Count Arnheim	Mr. Borrani.
Florestein	Mr. Durnsett.

The lesser parts were represented by names that need not be recalled, unless perhaps we add that the Child in the First Act was played by Miss Payne, who afterwards became Mrs. Aynsley Cook. Sir Julius Benedict was then the musical chief at Drury Lane, but Balfe himself conducted the first performance.

At this performance, the audience went almost wild with enthusiasm. "I dreamt that I dwelt in marble halls" and "Then you'll remember me" were twice repeated. For a few nights after the initial representation, however, the opera did not draw. The audiences that came were indeed enthusiastic, but it was not until nearly a fortnight had passed that there was anything like adequate houses. In consequence of this Balfe had in the meantime

gone to Paris, where he had other engagements on hand. But Drury Lane was filling up every night, and at last Bunn was in a position to send this message to the composer: "Come back to London. The 'Bohemian Girl' is a triumph. Houses crammed every night."

And so it went on till the hundredth night. Messrs. Chappell had given Balfe £500 for the right of printing and publishing the songs, and such was the demand for copies of these that they repaid themselves in a very short time. Bunn received £100 from the same firm for the use of the words. The melodies were snatched up and repeated everywhere in an incredibly short time. They were warbled to countless pianos, whistled by errand-boys, ground out on barrel-organs till, as one put it, they "beat upon the ear night and day like the waves of the restless ocean." The success of the opera and its influence upon society were, in fact, unparalleled. Mr. W. A. Barrett, Balfe's latest biographer, says that everything was tinged with a Gipsy complexion. Scores of songs relating to Gipsy life were

issued from the press. Novelists wrote stories in which were revived the old worked-up incidents connected with the wandering tribe. Readers began to inquire for George Borrow's book on the "Gipsies of Spain," issued two years before, and his publishers were encouraged to produce a new book by him in consequence of the success of the first. In short, the town was Gipsy mad, and all because of "The Bohemian Girl."

Nor did the popularity of the opera cease with its run in London. Staudigl, the eminent basso, produced it in a German version, and so popular did it become in the critical Fatherland that it was played at three different theatres in Vienna at the same time. It is one of the very few English operas that have ever achieved such distinction. In its Italian form it was produced at Drury Lane as "La Zingara" in February 1858, with Mdlle. Piccolomini as Arline and Giuglini as Thaddeus. Giuglini's rendering of "When other lips" was so exquisite that he was invariably encored. On this particular evening *one* encore was not sufficient for the audience, and

Piccolomini, whose part obliges her to remain on the stage listening to his love-song, grew weary of the reiterated calls for a repetition and calmly fetched a chair and sat herself down with a resigned look on her face, much to Giuglini's disgust. The French version, called "La Bohémienne," for which Balfe added several numbers and extended his original to five acts, was produced at the Théâtre Lyrique, Paris, in December 1869, and gained for Balfe the Cross of the Legion of Honour.

It may be added, in supplement of what has been said about the first production of "The Bohemian Girl" in 1843, that at the close of the hundredth performance Balfe was led on the stage and presented with a valuable tea-service. The inscription read: "To Mr. M. W. Balfe, the composer of eleven successful operas in London." Somebody subsequently remarked to Gilbert à Becket that it seemed odd to present an Irishman with a tea-service, whereupon the inveterate punster replied that he supposed it was in allusion to the Bohea—mian Girl!

THE COMPOSER

MICHAEL WILLIAM BALFE was born in Dublin in May 1808. His family, it is interesting to note here, had been professionally associated with music and the stage for many years. His grandfather played in the band of a Dublin theatre, and it is said that his great-grandfather was a pupil of the famous violinist, Dubourg, who played at the first performance of "The Messiah" in 1742. Balfe's father was a good violinist himself, and it was from him that the future composer received his first lessons. Later on, being entrusted to a more advanced master, he made such progress that he was able to appear in public—in the double character of violinist and composer, too!—before he was seven years old. Two years later, Madame Vestris was singing his ballads before enthusiastic audiences in

the comedy of "Paul Pry"—ballads which are not quite forgotten even now.

Young Balfe went on studying the violin with a view to a professional career until his father died in 1823. Then he determined to try his fortune in London. Charles Edward Horn, the singer (the same who wrote the air of "Cherry Ripe"), happened to be fulfilling an engagement in Dublin. Balfe went to him, and asked to be taken to London as an articulated pupil. Horn foresaw a musical future for the young aspirant, and articles were signed for a period of seven years. Balfe had not been many weeks in the metropolis when an unsuccessful *début* at the Oratorio concerts proved to him the need of further study, and study was diligently pursued for the next few years.

Meanwhile, he had to live, and to that end he accepted engagements as a violinist at Drury Lane Theatre and elsewhere. It was while at Drury Lane that one of the strangest incidents in Balfe's life happened. The orchestra had been engaged for Vauxhall Gardens, and Balfe went with his companions.

Not having too much money to spare, he decided to sleep in the neighbourhood. Lodgings proved rather difficult to find, but at last the young musician prevailed upon the landlady of one doubtful-looking establishment to take him in. The woman's manner was at first hesitating and confused, but after some delay, Balfe remaining meanwhile in the passage, she escorted him to his apartment for the night. Tired out, Michael soon fell asleep and did not wake till daybreak. And what an awakening it was! Prying about the room, he looked into a cupboard and found—a corpse! The landlady's uneasiness was explained. The only bed which she could turn to profitable account had been occupied by the remains of a deceased relative; but “the silver prevailing over the sentiment,” poor Balfe had been doomed to spend the night in the very bed which had contained the body of an old woman awaiting its funeral. He often joked about this experience, but never again did he sleep in a strange bedroom without first making a careful examination of its contents.

To return from this digression: Balfe conceived an idea that he might make something out of his voice; and the first result of that idea was an unsuccessful appearance on the operatic stage—at Norwich, as Caspar, in Weber's "Der Freischütz." Soon after this he had a romantic sort of experience. In London he met a certain Count Mazzara, who, seeing in him the very image of a son he had just lost, offered to take Balfe with him to Italy and bear the costs of his further training. Balfe lived in Rome with the Count for some time, pursuing his studies in a somewhat desultory fashion. His Irish gaiety and love of fun are well illustrated by an incident (in doubtful taste) which occurred about this time. It was during the Carnival. I quote the recorder of the incident: "The gaily-decked and flag-strung streets are crowded with sight-seers—cardinals, sisters, monks, visitors, tumblers, musicians, and flower-girls, all supposed to be doing nothing more harmful than sight-seeing. Balfe is not among them. Suddenly he remembered his striking likeness to the wife of his patron (the Countess Mazzara),

and straightway went and dressed himself in her costume and appeared at the window, making eyes and hideous faces at the monks and other ecclesiastics as they passed by, much to their annoyance and to the enjoyment of the scandal-mongers of the place." A gay dog was the composer of "The Bohemian Girl"!

At Milan, later, he studied especially singing and composition, and wrote music for a ballet which had a remarkable success. Next we find him in Paris, where the stern old Cherubini introduced him to Rossini. Rossini was so delighted with his singing of an air from the "Barbieri" that he promised to engage Balfe for the Italian opera if he would only study under Bordogni for a year before his *début*. Money was found for this purpose by a friend of Cherubini, and when the time came, Balfe made such a successful appearance at the Théâtre des Italiens that he was engaged for three years at a salary of 15,000 francs for the first year, 20,000 francs for the second, and 25,000 francs for the third. His health did not hold out to enable him to

complete the time, and he returned to Italy, where he sang at Palermo and elsewhere. It was now that he met his future wife, Mdlle. Lina Rosa, a Hungarian singer of great talent and beauty, whom he shortly afterwards married.

A meeting with Malibran resulted in an operatic and concert tour with that great artist. Then he returned to England, where his first notable opera, "The Siege of Rochelle," was produced with immense success at Drury Lane in October 1835. Next year came "The Maid of Artois," written for Malibran, for which he received £100. Opera succeeded opera with wonderful celerity. Balfe was a most prolific composer, having between 1829 and 1870 written no fewer than twenty-nine operas. Indeed, with few exceptions, English opera was represented for more than a quarter of a century solely by Balfe. He wrote with great quickness and spontaneity: in fact it has been charged against him that he was "too ready." But he cared very little for the dicta of the pedants and the big wigs. He "wrote what came at the moment to his

mind; he drew his inspiration at an ever-welling fount of melody, a spring that was perennially fresh and sparkling." There is a good illustration of this. The story goes that a young musician applied to Balfe for lessons in harmony and composition. On being told that he had already gone through Albrechtsberger's and Cherubini's works on counterpoint and fugue, Balfe very candidly said to the intended pupil: "Then you had better go to some one else, for I'm blest if you don't understand much more already of such matters than I could teach you in a century."

One would have thought that the labour entailed in the composition of such a host of operatic works would exclude the possibility of other engagements. But night after night found Balfe on the boards at Drury Lane; now playing *Theodore* in "Joan of Arc," and again sustaining the principal rôle in "Farinelle," or taking part in "Scaramuzzia" at the Lyceum. There can be no question that Balfe's knowledge of vocalisation and his powers as a singer helped him greatly to write in that melodious, mellifluous style

which marks him as one of the sweetest melodists of his time.

Grown thus familiar with the stage, we cannot wonder that Balfe should have been tempted, like Handel, to undertake the responsibilities of management. He leased the Lyceum in 1840, and came before the public with "Keolanthé," Madame Balfe playing the principal part. Fortune, alas! forsook him, and the enterprise was abandoned. It was under this disappointment that Balfe removed to Paris, whither his fame had preceded him. In 1843 he was back in England, with "The Bohemian Girl." He went to Paris again in 1845; but next year, on the secession of Sir Michael Costa, he was appointed conductor of the Italian Opera at Her Majesty's Theatre, "a post for which he was eminently fitted by his personal skill as an instrumentalist and vocalist and his intimate knowledge of operatic details." At the end of 1852 he was released from all his musical engagements, and the next few years were spent in various musical tours in England and abroad.

Balfe's active career was practically over

by this time. In 1864 he gave up his London house, and removed to Rowney Abbey, a small estate in Hertfordshire, which he had bought. It was there that he died in the autumn of 1870. His remains rest in Kensal Green Cemetery, and there is a tablet to his memory in Westminster Abbey.

It may be added that Balfe had a daughter, Victoire, a very good vocalist, who sang in opera in England and on the Continent. Her personal charms and musical accomplishments so fascinated our ambassador at St. Petersburg, Sir John F. Crampton, that she became Lady Crampton in a few weeks after her arrival in the Russian capital. Unfortunately she was divorced; marrying afterwards the Duke de Frias, a Spanish nobleman. A son was recently (1906) reported destitute, and a candidate for admission to the Charterhouse.



